

The Grandfathers

by

Bland Simpson



*Together with Addresses of Friends on the Occasion of
His Acceptance of the North Caroliniana Society Award for 2010*

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COVER PHOTO: *A well-kept secret about Louis Round Wilson Library on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is finally revealed by Bland Simpson in his address, "The Grandfathers." On your next visit, see if you can find the "oops."* (Cover and all color photos by Jerry W. Cotten; black and white photos by Jan G. Hensley.)

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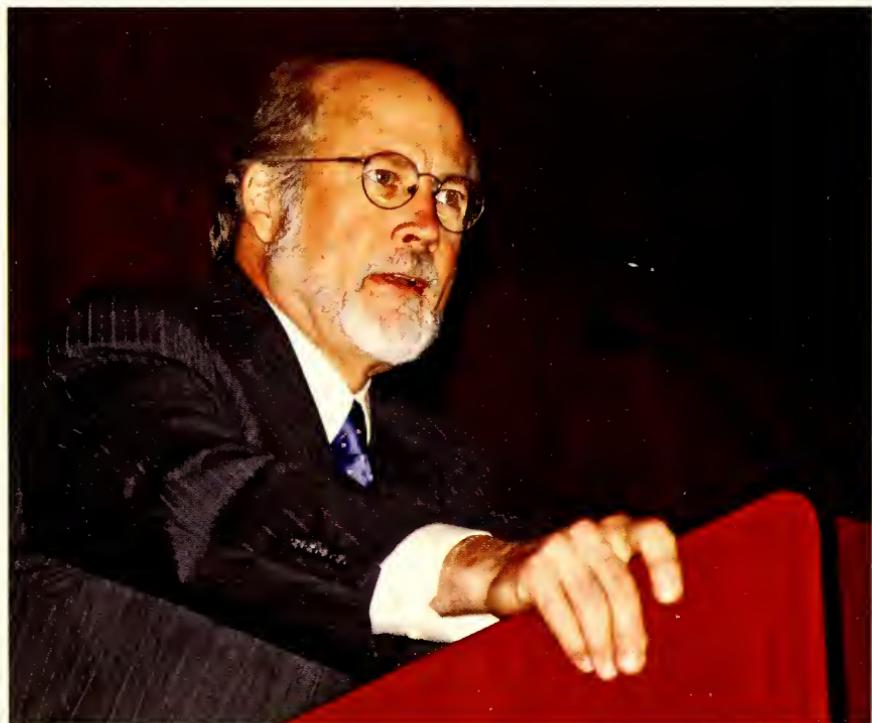
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NORTH CAROLINIANA SOCIETY
2010

PART I

The Afternoon Session

As is the custom for recipients of the North Caroliniana Society Award for outstanding contributions to North Carolina's history, literature, and culture, Bland Simpson delivered a public address in the George Watts Hill Alumni Center on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill on Friday, May 21, 2010. He is shown below during his address, "The Grandfathers," the edited text of which follows.



1900
1870
1860

The Grandfathers

Bland Simpson

President Whichard, officers and members of the North Caroliniana Society, Dean Gil and leaders of the College of Arts & Sciences here at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, colleagues from the Department of English & Comparative Literature and Creative Writing at Carolina, Director Torrey from UNC Press, colleagues from schools around the state, members of the North Carolina Coastal Federation, my fellow writers, former students, dear friends and family members from near and far:

My wife Ann and I offer you all our deepest thanks for being here today.

And before another moment passes, I want to thank Dr. H.G. Jones for arranging all this, and for a lifetime of progressive leadership of our state.

A hundred and six years ago last night, Leonora Monteiro Martin contributed her “Here’s to the land of the longleaf pine” toast for use at the North Carolina Society of Richmond, Virginia’s banquet. We’ll return to her lyric, which includes a line stating that this is “where the weak grow strong and the strong grow great,” a little later this evening.

Just now, as to the strong growing great, I want to tell you about my second cousin once-removed’s uncle by marriage. His name was John Ferebee, and fifty or sixty years ago he was a legendary cottage-mover on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. He specialized in sliding cottages westward, back away from the encroaching ocean, though he also moved them north and south up and down the beach. Over on Roanoke Island, some homes in Manteo now stand on foundations they were not built upon, thanks to this man’s work. There was *nothing* he couldn’t move—why, I believe he once moved a small hotel!

Down on Hatteras Island, back in the 1950s when the moving of the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse first got talked about, they even consulted with him to see how he would do it, and, though it wasn’t till 1999 that the light retreated from the Atlantic, old-timers say that some of the cottage mover’s suggestions and methods from forty years earlier were put to use.

Uncle John was extremely well-known, famous even, as the man who could move anything, and his motto was: “No job too large or too small.”

Famous, that is, in Dare County and parts of eastern Hyde and southern Currituck counties, and probably not unknown over in swampy Tyrrell. Yet,

once that we know of, his fame transcended the Carolina sound country and made it all the way up to Manhattan.

An old lady from Manteo decided she needed to take a trip and go see New York City one time in her life. So she got there and signed up for the Gray Line "Historic Sites" Tour right away. First place they went was to see the Old Dutch House, a little two-story affair down on Wall Street dwarfed by the towers of commerce, and, after the tour-guide's spiel, the old lady from Manteo was unimpressed and said from the back of the crowd, "We got one of these back home."

The tour guide was peeved, but held his tongue. And then they went over to St. Mark's Place and looked at the beautiful commercial buildings along Second Avenue, the Italianate details of the roofs and windows, and the little old lady thought about the antique buildings in downtown Manteo and said, a little louder this time, "We got some of these back home."

Then they drifted down to South Street Seaport and studied the historic ships there, the schooners and square-riggers, and the old lady, reminded of all the weathered sailboats and juniper skiffs in Shallowbag Bay there at Manteo, said firmly: "We got some of these back home!"

And so it went, all through the whole four-hour tour, the tour guide getting more and more steamed by the old Manteo lady's refrain but never responding, till they finally reached the last site of the day: the Empire State Building. They went up to the Observation Deck, and the tour guide pointed out features of the New York skyline, showed them all the yellow cabs in the world down below. And then, slapping the great skyscraper's side, he preempted the little old lady from Manteo, saying, "Well, madam, I know you don't have one of *these* back home."

"No," she said. "But we got somebody can *move* it."

.....

I want to speak with you for a little while this afternoon about some of my people, in particular—with all deference to my parents and to my grandmothers—in particular, my two grandfathers, who have loomed large in my life: the one, who died two years before my birth and whom I was only to know by report and reputation, yet who gave his name to both my father and to me and who gave me no small part of my Elizabeth City river-town heritage, for he hailed from "way down yonder on the Pasquotank, where the bullfrogs jump from bank to bank"; and the other, whom I knew well and who gave me a love of storytelling (and a good many stories, too) and even more low-land heritage, for he hailed from Tar Landing on the New River in Onslow County, "the shortest river in the world," as they say, "to be *so wide*."

My grandfather Simpson, Martin Bland Simpson Sr., was born in

Elizabeth City in 1893. He was a young boy there when Beautiful Nell Cropsey went missing, mysteriously, in November 1901, and as an eight-year-old boy he may have run down Riverside Avenue with other boys to see and join the mob of men—2,000 strong, some said—who thronged the Cropsey place when her body was brought in from the river where two fishermen had found it, just after Christmas that year. One way or the other, he bore witness to a great tragedy and mystery. And my grandfather Simpson was there when the Wright Brothers came passing through Elizabeth City in the autumns of 1900, 1901, 1902, and that signal year for them, and for the world, 1903.

After public schooling, Martin Simpson went on to study law at Wake Forest College, back when it *was* at Wake Forest—how often have I headed east on old NC 98 and curved around that old campus and wondered where he lived, where he walked. As a young lawyer, he did a short stint with the federal prosecutor in the eastern district, a well-known older lawyer, E.F. Aydlett—the attorney who back in 1902 had defended Jim Wilcox when Wilcox was tried—twice—for the murder of Beautiful Nell Cropsey. But my grandfather did not take to the prosecutor's life at all. Not long before he died years later, he mused:

“I came back, and since, I've devoted myself to defending people. Some will say it pays better, and maybe it does, but there just isn't enough money to pay me for the distaste I have for prosecuting a man. I just can't do it.”

He married Jeanette Foster of Norfolk, served in the U. S. Navy, had two children, my aunt Jean and my father Martin Bland Jr., and he hung out his own shingle—or, rather, placed his own decaled letters on the frosted glass of his office door in the Chesson Building at the corner of Poindexter and East Main in Elizabeth City—half a century or so later, in about 1977, when I was touring the ruin of the old theatre and office suite in that building, I could read his name in the glue that had held those letters in place. More recently, just two months ago, in fact, my Coastal Cohorts Jim Wann and Don Dixon and I enjoyed performing in the newly renovated Maguire Theatre in the Chesson Building, and using my grandfather Simpson's old law office, which is now a dressing room.

Soon Granddaddy Simpson moved up the street, to the Hinton Building, or Carolina Building as we called it, a structure that took up almost an entire city block, and set up his practice on the fourth floor in three rooms overlooking East Main Street, four stories directly above the ground-floor arcade that led to the stairs, to the elevator (with its operator turning a wheel and opening and closing an accordion gate), and to the Carolina Theatre, a moviehouse. From here he lawyered on through the Depression and the Second World War—and *The Daily Advance* newspaper would one day say of him:

“During his long practice, Mr. Simpson has represented hundreds of

clients, always as a defending counsel, and he was rated as the most effective man before a jury in the First Judicial District. He was said never to have refused to defend a man because the man could not pay him. His friends were legion, and those who had broken a lance with him were unstinting in their admiration of his power of mind."

He was also quite active in Democratic politics and was a close confidante of another Elizabeth City lawyer, whom he helped get elected to the highest office in our state: Governor J.C.B. Ehringhaus, whose name is on one of our South Campus dormitories here at Carolina. In the courtroom, I heard, he occasionally engaged in theatrics that would be impermissible today, to wit: Once, to divert a jury's attention from his opponent's stentorian orations, Granddaddy Simpson cut the masthead off of a copy of the Elizabeth City High School's student newspaper, put a tape loop on the back of it, and slapped it surreptitiously onto the back of the opposing lawyer's suit coat, my grandfather feigning a hearty congratulation to his opponent at the close of one line of questioning. The masthead, as a characterizing label on the man's back, got the jury's attention and the jury members laughed thereafter each time the opponent rose to address the court or approach the bench, for the name of that paper was . . . *THE LOUDSPEAKER*.

My grandfather Simpson *loved the water*—he and my grandmother built one of the early cottages at Nags Head (not a member of Catherine Bishir's antique “unpainted aristocracy,” but not too far to the north of that group), just a quarter mile north of where the USS *Huron* came in and shipwrecked in November 1877. And *he loved boats* and he usually had one around. Author, hunter and hunting guide Travis Morris of Currituck County told me a few years ago that my grandfather Simpson was the man who had taken him through Oregon Inlet on a boat for the very first time in his life, and that is *not* a casual jaunt.

In the late 1930s, Granddaddy Simpson sponsored a couple of steamship cruises for himself and my father. One was a New Year's Eve, 1938, cruise from New York to Bermuda aboard the *S.S. Hamburg*, and the other was a July 1939 voyage to Havana on the liner *Oriente*. I came into souvenirs of both of those trips: a beautiful 4-thread weave sport coat from H.A. and E. Smith's of Hamilton, Bermuda; and a cache of commercial cards from Cuba, such as the small Spanish-English phrasebook from King Saloman Store: “largest wholesaler & retailer of all brands of cigars, liquors, perfumes and Cuban novelties in Havana.”

Granddaddy Simpson, having worked for the Upton Fruit Company in Norfolk at one point, helped get my father a job in the summer of 1941, a position as a cadet in the Merchant Marine, which meant a deck hand on a banana boat plying the lanes between Hampton Roads and Central America—my father stood about 5'10” and amongst the sailors he apparently wanted to

appear to be larger and tougher than he was, so he gave himself a nickname worthy of the World Wrestling Federation and wrote, in white-painted letters, across the top of his black lunchbox: "Martin the Mauler." I asked him once to recall his time as a banana-boat worker, and he said simply, "Never in my life have I seen so many tarantulas!" Tarantulas notwithstanding, my father had picked up a powerful love of boats from my grandfather and had learned his way around them too. When he joined the Navy the following year, on his September 1942 enlistment papers he stated that he had a Department of Commerce motorboat operator's license (and *had* had it for two years, since he was eighteen years old), qualifying him to captain diesel- and gasoline-powered craft with length/overall of up to sixty-five feet!

I wonder if Martin Simpson Sr. may have somehow been behind the mysterious ownership by my father of a 48-foot, 12-ton, two-masted Core Sound sharpie, the *Lucy May*, built in Smyrna in Down East Carteret County in 1904. The U.S. Maritime Registry lists the *Lucy May* as having been owned by Martin Simpson Jr. from 1943 till 1946, years during which my father was away from Elizabeth City and the Carolina coast, serving in the U.S. Navy.

The *Lucy May* was not just any vessel. She was a veritable *legend*, for she was the *Lucy May* that had made it through what is called Down East the *Royal Shoals Incident*. Back in March 1929, heavy weather behind Ocracoke Inlet fell upon several Core Sound craft that were there working the oyster grounds, the *Lucy May* one of them—her crew members were three very young Gaskill brothers, who had awakened to snow and ice in the rigging, the boat dragging anchor, and a smart northwest wind upon them. Yet the sharpie got them across the edge of the Mullet Shoals and past Harbor Island and behind Cedar Island, whereupon they finally put in from Core Sound over the flooded marsh, tied the *Lucy May* to a pine tree, and waded on home.

Years later, might M.B. Simpson Sr. have taken the *Lucy May* in total or partial payment for some legal services? And might he not have titled the craft in my father's name, instead of his own, for some reason? My father passed away in the early 1970s, and neither my mother nor my aunt recalls this craft, nor does anyone else whom I have asked, yet I must keep asking: How does a 48-foot vessel get into and out of a family and no one know about it? Though I do love an unsolved mystery, as I have made pretty clear in two books, I do want, and intend, to solve this one.

It was probably a good thing there was no *Lucy May* around to distract my father when he mustered out of the Navy. He went back into the University of North Carolina School of Law, finished his last two years, and graduated with the well-known and justifiably honored UNC Law Class of 1948, whose members included such state and University leaders as William Friday, William Aycock, William Dees, and John R. Jordan Jr. When my father and mother

and their then six-week-old son moved to Elizabeth City in early December of 1948, he took up the practice of law in the Carolina Building in his late father's office, which my grandmother Simpson had kept intact for him in the two years between my grandfather Simpson's death and my father's passing the North Carolina Bar. My father, also a popular Democratic politician, eventually became Pasquotank County's prosecuting attorney, before his health forced him to retire at much too young an age, though his office was still intact when the Carolina Building burned down and was completely ruined on March 1st, 1967.

The only item from my grandfather's and father's law office to survive was the heat-mangled-and-ruined office safe, which fell all the way from the fourth floor down to the theatre arcade. Someone brought it out to my father's home off the Hertford highway, just west of town, and there I found it, hidden in a huge clump of grass in the yard, and then spied the little one and a half inch by four inch metal name plate that I recalled at once from the Carolina Building law office: VICTOR SAFE COMPANY.

I worked that little nameplate off the ruined safe and brought it back to Chapel Hill, where it is today, cleaned up and screwed to the top of my four-drawer wooden filing cabinet in Greenlaw Hall here on campus, safe and sound. If you stop by 231 Greenlaw Hall sometime, I'll show it to you—I like having it there, for it takes me back to another time and place, and reminds me of my father and of the grandfather I never knew.

.....

My other grandfather, Julius Andrews Page Sr., started his life as a Tar Landing, Onslow County farmboy. I did know *him* very well, and most everyone in this room knows him too, if not by his name, then by his very good works, as you shall see.

Life on a late nineteenth-century one-horse, one-mule tobacco farm was rustic indeed, and my grandfather Page grew up hunting squirrels in the forests near the New River with an old flintlock. Once, when he was riding the family mule, the mule threw him, breaking his arm and sending a piece of bone through his skin, and he then had to ride—to a doctor to get his broken arm set—on the very mule that had injured him in the first place. A more felicitous equine experience came when he was charged with taking the family's tobacco crop by horse and wagon to market up in Kinston . . . he left before dawn, made it to Kinston—distance of over thirty miles—that afternoon, sold the bright leaf, and started home. Made it back down past Richlands very late, after dark, before he fell asleep still eight miles or so from home—he woke up a while later when the horse quit plodding, having come to a full stop right outside the Page farmhouse, where it now waited for my grandfather to unhitch it and take it to the barn.

THE GRANDFATHERS

7



Julius Andrews Page Sr.
(1886-1976)

Martin Bland Simpson Sr.
(1893-1946)



As a boy, he saw the redshirts ride on horseback through Richlands; he heard Charles Brantley Aycock give his last campaign speech before election day 1900; and then the family moved to Wilmington, just two years after the riot and the coup. He had finished eighth grade in Onslow County and now, in New Hanover County, his remaining schooling would be on construction sites. He often told me that he had known the first moment as an apprentice, when he picked up the carpenter's tool tray for the first time, *this* was what he wanted to do with his life: to build.

He worked alongside black men and white, and he learned all the trades, framing, joining, masonry, roofing, plumbing . . . before long he was moving about eastern North Carolina, working on public buildings: constructing them, renovating them, fireproofing them. Somewhere along the way he learned how to play the piano, played hymns out of the Baptist hymnal, and Tin Pan Alley songs that were fairly new at the time, "In the Good Old Summertime" and such. Once at a country dance party, he sat down at the piano when the fiddler and string-band took a break, and Granddaddy played "Good Night, Ladies," inadvertently causing the party to break up, and everyone to go home. Unusual situations and social doings from those days became, decades later, the sources of stories he would tell me as consolation after defeating me in checkers, a game at which he excelled (we must have played between 500 and 1000 games, and I only recall beating him once or twice).

He was peripatetic—Granddaddy told me of arriving in Pineville, county seat of Wyoming County, West Virginia, to fireproof the courthouse. It needed fireproofing in more than one way—when he arrived he learned that the sheriff of the county was in jail for shooting and killing the clerk of court. While elsewhere in that great state, one Sunday he and a pair of other men decided to ride on horseback from Lewisburg over to White Sulphur Springs; on the way, they stopped for water at a farmhouse, and the farmer showed the riders his pride and joy, a large stone on the ground in the shape of a slab of pork. "Yes, sir," he said, "that's my petrified ham. Petrified ham, sure is."

Another time, in the big, empty section of the southeastern coastal plain of North Carolina that comprises such places as Warsaw, Burgaw, Calypso, Tomahawk, Beautancus and Beulaville, Granddaddy Page once found work for a spell supervising the renovation of one crossroads community's jail. He stayed at the small hotel, took his meals in the little dining room there, and, as he was dealing with the improvement of an important local edifice, he met the hamlet's agrarian and mercantile leadership rather quickly.

The second or third Sunday he was in town, Granddaddy had dinner after church with one of these prominent citizens and his comely wife. As they parted, Granddaddy—in his linen suit not only the best-dressed man ever to fireproof a courthouse but also one of the most genuine and genuinely

courteous—shook hands with the gentleman and responded to the lady's "We certainly did enjoy dining with you, Mister Page" with the innocent remark:

"Well, I certainly hope I'll be seeing more of you."

To which she said, "I'm sure you will," and that was that.

Not long afterward, there came to my grandfather at the hotel an invitation from this woman and her husband asking him to join them and a couple of dozen other kindred friendly spirits for a big Sunday afternoon dinner on the ground some miles out of town at a popular swimming and picnicking spot. When the day came and Granddaddy arrived at the convocation, he in his Sunday finest riding upon a rented horse a little after the appointed hour, he was *not* surprised that he had in the course of his first month in town already met most of these folks.

He was stunned, though, to find them all stark naked.

As the new arrival and attendant, his presence had been quickly noted, and the option of backtracking was not to be his. He dismounted, and the lovely woman who had issued the invitation came confidently approaching him, saying,

"Mister Page, we're so glad you could come out and join us for dinner and a swim."

Quickly re-cementing his composure, he bowed modestly and dealt with the moment directly and unapologetically, observing to her with a wry smile:

"You know, when I told you, back in town the other week, that I hoped I'd be seeing more of you, I had no idea that I'd be seeing *so much* more of you. . . ."

His tale-spinning went no further. But I don't believe my grandfather took them up on their big municipal naturism, this immersion with the leading lights. It wasn't like him, and it certainly was not a condition of his brief employment re-engineering their hoosegow.

In the employ of the Southern Jail Building Company of Baltimore, Maryland, he also worked on jails in Camden, N.C., and Manteo, N.C., and, before that, quite fatefully, built the jail on Main Street in Columbia, North Carolina, in 1909. One November day that year Miss Evelyn Spruill of Columbia, daughter of the late merchant and state senator Joseph Spruill, walked down the street from her home on the arm of her cousin Nat Meekins to go and see the new building, and there she met its twenty-three-year-old builder, J.A. Page. Six weeks later, in the parlor of her nearby home on the corner of Bridge and North Broad streets, they were married, and remained happily so, until her death fifty-seven years later. My grandfather never tired of remarking: "Mrs. Page and I . . . met in jail."

When he was returning from that West Virginia trek I mentioned earlier, my grandmother came to meet him at a hotel in Sparta, North Carolina, just south of the *mountain* New River. My grandfather was able to get to

Independence, Virginia, just north of the New, by public conveyances, but he had to make his *own* way from Independence to Sparta. So he rented a horse and buggy and went down the mountainside to the New River at night. At one point, he felt the buggy's wheel edging off the road and over the precipice and he stopped the horse and prayed over the matter with him and eased the buggy back onto the narrow road and continued down the mountain. Man and horse reached the broad and shallow New River, and there was only starlight enough for him to see the forest wall on the far side—he could not make out where the break in the woods was, where the ford led to. "Horse," he said, "it's up to you—you've got to get us there." He loosened the reins and let the horse make its own way, the horse's hooves hitting the stones in the shallows, clattering slowly over them. After several tense minutes, the horse pulled the buggy up from the river and into the imperceptible opening and the road on into Sparta, which my grandfather reached forthwith. My grandmother and, indeed, our entire family, have been forever grateful to that very keen horse.

Before long, Granddaddy Page found himself in our nation's capital with his wife and infant son. Now he was working on the Washington, D.C., jail, the family living on Capitol Hill during the dreadful summer heat-wave of 1911, when the brick rowhouses heated up like ovens during the days, and families from all over the Hill found their homes unendurable, and so ventured nightly by the thousands to the Capitol lawn, where they would linger until the heat broke and the houses vented and cooled enough for them to return and rest along about midnight, if not later.

My grandparents had five children in all, all of them born in Wilmington between 1910 and 1920, when my mother Dorothy, the youngest, was born in a house on Sixth Street just south of Market. My grandfather worked two winters during the Great War down at Fort Caswell on the eastern end of Oak Island, where the Cape Fear River meets the sea, and back in Wilmington he helped build a pair of concrete ships for the U. S. Navy. The Page family was thereabouts till 1923, when Granddaddy Page came into the management of a small sand and gravel quarry outside of Hamlet, North Carolina. But not for long.

Someone put this young, now thirty-eight-year-old builder, with his richly-varied experience in public works, in touch with an opportunity farther upstate. Sometime in 1924, Julius Andrews Page shook hands with University of North Carolina President Harry Chase and Trustee John Sprunt Hill and contractor T.C. Thompson and then my grandfather Page came to work as the contractor's Superintendent of Construction. In that capacity, for the next eight years he laid his hand upon the grand old Chapel Hill campus and changed the face of it.

In 1925, Playmakers Theatre was one of his first projects—this was the old Smith Hall, once a ballroom, once a library and recently vacated by the

law school, the same building where the Union cavalry had stabled its horses during the late spring and summer of 1865, now to be converted into a theatre for the fairly new Carolina Playmakers. The folk-play group was less than a decade old at that time, yet under the leadership of Proff Frederick Koch it already claimed as its own future novelist Thomas Wolfe and future Pulitzer dramatist Paul Green. The new theatre was dedicated November 23, 1925.

My grandfather then built the stadium: excavating the hillsides and blasting stone out and crushing it and using it in the concrete that made the great structure, and he had the planks for the benches hewn from the oaks he had cut off those same hills. He always wore a white linen suit on the job site, a challenge to my grandmother to keep clean—there was a strong reason for it though; anyone working in the stadium could spot him in an instant and, in that age before walkytalkies and cellphones, could get right to him to solve a problem. On the 24th of November, 1927, the University dedicated Kenan Stadium.

Granddaddy Page was sitting with University Comptroller Charlie Woollen when a chunk of plaster fell out of the old Memorial Hall ceiling and into an aisle, hurting no one though it could've wounded or killed anyone there . . . and the two of them knew at that moment that a new Memorial Hall was in order, was a necessity. He tore down the old one and put up the one we all know, which so recently underwent a magnificent renovation.

He built Graham Memorial, honoring our young University President Edward Kidder Graham, who had died in the influenza epidemic of 1918. Graham's call to public service, his vision of the campus being coterminous with the borders of the state, still resound mightily with us today, as does his inaugural declaration from 1915 that "the state university is the instrument of democracy for realizing all [these] high and healthful aspirations of the state." Each spring, Creative Writing at Carolina now celebrates its senior honors poetry and fiction students by staging readings of their original works in the great lounge of Graham Memorial.

Granddaddy Page put up the Belltower in 1930-31: One day, when the Belltower was all but finished, the great photographer Bayard Wootten—please see Jerry Cotten's terrific book *Light and Air* about her—found my grandfather and asked him to allow her to climb to the top and take photographs from up there. He considered the idea, then refused. Bayard Wootten asked again, reminding Mr. Page that she was not afraid of heights (she would hang off a mountainside, she said *and did*, in order to get the shot), but he didn't think it was a good idea. Why not? "Well," he said, "I still have men working inside." And she at last gathered from his circumspect speech that what he was trying to avoid was having his workmen, as she climbed stairs and ladders, looking up her dress—when she realized *this* was the focal point of his objection, she began to laugh and tossed off the remark, "Oh, that's all right, Mister Page, no need to worry—I wear *bloomers*."

He still wouldn't let her.

In 1927, he renovated South Building, which had been standing in near-ruin. When he and one professor and one member of the board of trustees toured South to inspect and inventory it, they found, he told me, scores of places where the bricks of the outer wall, which was also the inner wall, were loose, moveable by hand, or were altogether missing, leaving holes and letting in the elements. After their tour, the three men walked out into Y-Court and the teacher and the trustee turned to the builder, and my grandfather told them: "We can demolish it and salvage about \$5,000 worth of re-usable brick and other materials." He went on. "Yet if we do that, we will have torn down one of the great monuments of the University and the state of North Carolina, and I don't believe we should. Let's write a budget for its renovation, and save it." And that is the recommendation they made to the trustees. By my estimation, he felt *that* day, and that all-important conversation in Y-Court, to be among the signal events of his professional life.

The Library (later named for University Librarian Louis Round Wilson) was far and away his favorite labor of love, and decades after its 1929 dedication, he would still walk over from his Franklin Street home and look the library over with humble regard.

During the 1920s expansion of the University, a full-gauge railroad train ran right through campus. Each of Wilson Library's six Corinthian columns comprises four discrete pieces, all of which were rolled down from the flatcars that bore them into Polk Place. From railcar to construction site, all of the column pieces fared just fine in their transits as they came rolling down over planks road, all *except* for the one piece that is now set on the left (as one faces the library), or easternmost, column at its bottom. As it rolled, a little five-inch chunk broke out of the fluting.

A fleet of Italian stone masons was on hand to cast and install the columns' capitals, and my grandfather appealed to them to craft a repair, which they did and which one can see by leaning out over the eastern portico railing and looking a little up and to the left. This is the *only* way to get a glimpse.

Granddaddy first showed this small flaw to me when I just a boy, and from time to time we would check on it together and make sure it was holding up all right. For this Onslow County farmboy to have grown and become a master builder and to have a hand in the making of Wilson Library, exemplifying as it did knowledge and learning to him, was to have touched and been touched by the very heart and soul of the University. His recollection of how the chip had happened and how it got repaired (and virtually hidden, a University secret) was one of pleasure and bemusement; I took it that he thought the flaw showed the one and only—and perhaps almost necessary—imperfection in the otherwise perfect Greek Revival building.

Hard, sturdy and staunch as the column chip's repair is, there is also something about it that is just as tender as mercy.

.....

The grandfathers live on in my two sisters and me, and in our children and our kin. These men were legends to me when I was growing up, and they still are. Over the years, in looking ever more closely at the stories of their lives and of their times and places, I have been led into deeper explorations of all manner of North Caroliniana: geography, history, legends, lore, much of it coastal, to be sure, yet plenty of piedmont, too—and I have recently discovered territory west of Greensboro, and now know that one can get from the Ashe County high country by serpentine switchbacks down to Haywood County in less than half a day's ride.

My wife Ann and I, along with our children, and many of our friends, seem to have been on a major scouting expedition for well over two decades, one that gives no indication of letting up anytime soon. What are we after? Knowledge, inspiration, beauty and art in nature. From just such a field trip, here are a few exemplary words from poet Michael McFee, my great friend and colleague, about an afternoon that we spent together twelve years ago boating on the Pamlico River near Washington:

Odd

Later, in the local museum, we discovered
this was in fact a water lotus seedpod,

but floating toward us on the winter river –
face-down, a stem-stub rising from its back –

it looked as out of place as a lost carving
from some fabled pharaoh's dynastic tomb

or a tiny antique gramophone horn
sending forgotten songs into the Pamlico.

I lifted the odd pod from a cold current
and turned it over, filling my cupped hands,

shivering at the dozens of purplish seeds
in deep-set sockets, in concentric circles,

waiting for us to pluck them out and scatter
their tidings across the darkening water

during our slow odyssey home – which we did,
broadcasting them all except for this last one

still rattling in its cavity, dried-out, black,
weird noisemaker for a new millennium.

The reading of our poems, the telling and retelling of tales that are deeply rooted in this astonishing province, in classrooms and assembly halls, libraries and living rooms, around firesides in the wilderness, this is no small part of what binds us together as North Carolinians, as Southerners, and as Americans. What better way for us to hold onto and honor the common cultural language we need as we speak and work with each other, as we try to solve old problems of the natural and human worlds that have followed us into this *new millennium*. Judge William Gaston's lyric imperative in our state song says, "Let all those who love us love the land that we live in," significantly declaring that the people and the land are virtually one and the same! Everyone in this company today is bound together by and bound up in a deep love of North Carolina, and may it always be so—my dear friends, I thank you for this day from the top of my Mount Mitchell spirit, from the bottom of my Tar Heel heart, and from the sweep of my Sea Level soul. God bless you all. Here's to the land!

(Author's note: Portions of this talk appear, in slightly different form, in: *Into the Sound Country; Long Story Short; Carolina Alumni Review* (Volume 97, Number 5); and the upcoming book *The Coasts of Carolina*. The poem "Odd" is quoted herein with the poet's permission.)



PART II

Banquet Session

Martin H. Brinkley, Master of Ceremonies

At this point in our program, it is traditional to say something about the North Caroliniana Society. So I will say two sentences: Our passion is North Carolina and our motto is "Substance, not Show." This means that we *do* rather than talk about doing, and we seek *service* rather than publicity. For example, we did not seek publicity for this event because we wanted it to be held in the presence of Bland Simpson's family and close friends.

Not all of you heard Bland's remarks this afternoon, but no need to ask for copies, because they, along with the full proceedings of this meeting, will be published later this year in our *North Caroliniana Society Imprints* series, a complimentary copy of which will go to you in the mail in the fall. For that reason, in choosing our speakers, we try to think of persons who have unique



perspectives on our award recipient and who can put into the public record (for that is what the *Imprints* will do) some aspects of the recipient's life that may otherwise go unrecorded. For Bland Simpson, that is a challenge, but we are up to it.

Our first speaker is Jack Betts.

Jack is a native of Greensboro, graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill's Class of 1968, and former photographer assigned to the Army Photographic Agency at the Pentagon. He began his newspapering career with the *Greensboro Daily News*, did a brief stint in public relations for the Association of American Railroads, and was Washington correspondent for the morning and evening dailies in Norfolk, Roanoke, and Greensboro during the Watergate affair. He has also been Raleigh Bureau Chief for the *Greensboro Daily News*, Editor of *North Carolina Insight* at the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, and since 1992 has been the Raleigh-based associate editor for *The Charlotte Observer*, where he writes daily editorials, a weekly column, and frequent posts on the blog *This Old State*. He is a member of the cast of North Carolina Spin, the weekly televised commentary program, and has appeared on public television and public radio. He is a member of the North Carolina Journalism Hall of Fame.

[Mr. Betts's remarks are published on pages 18-23 of this *Imprint*.]

It is now my pleasure to introduce Lucinda MacKethan.

Dr. MacKethan is Alumni Distinguished Professor of English at North Carolina State University, where she teaches courses in American literature, African-American literature, and Southern writers, and serves as coordinator of the teacher-certification program in English. A director of several National Endowment for the Humanities summer institutes for high school and college teachers, she has also worked with the National Humanities Center to implement in-service enrichment programs for high school faculty. Her publications include *Daughters of Time: Creating Women's Voice in Southern Story*, *The Dream of Arcady: Place and Time in Southern Literature*, *Mark Twain's Mother: Gender, Slavery, and the Study of Southern Literature*, and recent articles on Flannery O'Connor, Maya Angelou, Tony Morrison, and gender in plantation fiction. She is currently working on a study of the life, novels, and influence of Anya Seton.

[Dr. MacKethan's remarks are published on pages 24-28 of this *Imprint*.]

Our concluding speaker, Frank Graham Queen, graduated from the UNC Law School in 1976 and has been practicing in Waynesville ever since. He served on the Board of Directors of Legal Aid of North Carolina for nine years, including a year as president. He has served, with our President Whichard, on the Appellate Rules Study Committee of the North Carolina Bar Association and helped draft their Style Manual in 1999. Members of Mr. Queen's family have lived on the same farm in Haywood County for more than 130 years, but he lives in town because he hates farm labor. He is named after his father's boss, then-Senator Frank Porter Graham, and thus learned to accept losing elections from a tender age.

[Mr. Queen's remarks are published on pages 29-31 of this *Imprint*.

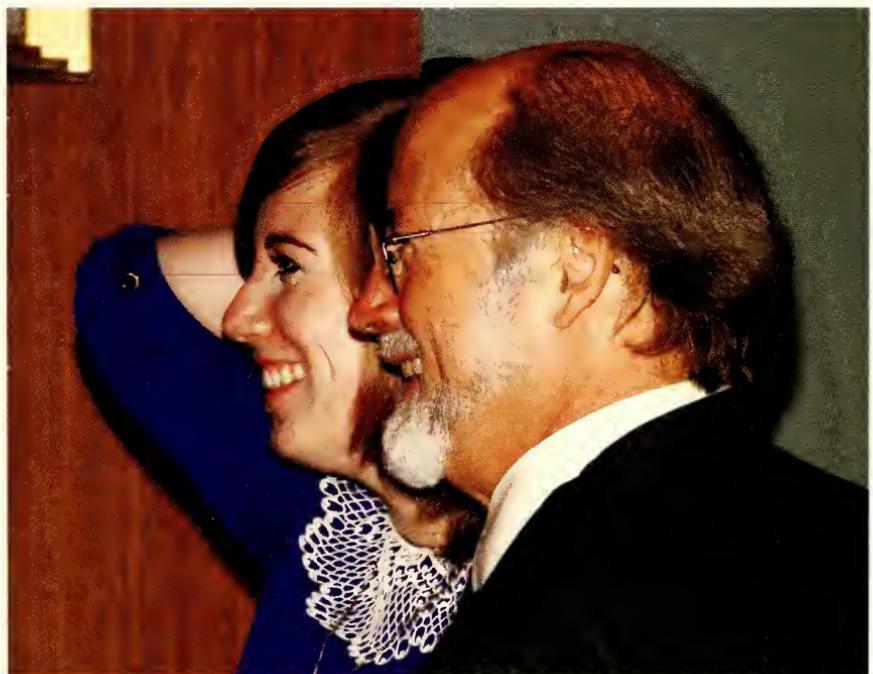


A Ramble with the Kingfish

Jack Betts

I'm thrilled to be with you tonight to deliver my report as corresponding secretary of the Upper Roanoke River Drainage District's Bland Simpson Fan Club and Marching and Chowder Society. As a very few of you may know from reading an obscure blog called "This Old State" in the digital pages of *The Charlotte Observer*, I have from time to time waxed enthusiastic about the work of Bland and his colleagues of the Red Clay Ramblers and Coastal Cohorts. Once, stealing a page from Richard Walser's *North Carolina Miscellany*, I named what I regard as the Seven Wonders of North Carolina. At the end of that list I added, just as did *Asheville Citizen* Editor Don Shoemaker when he wrote his own list many years ago, something like, "But wait, I haven't even mentioned Bland Simpson or Roy Williams yet."





Ann Cary Simpson (top) and Cary Bland Simpson (bottom) listen as Jack Betts, Lucinda MacKethan, and Frank Queen describe their observation of and experiences with Bland Simpson. The speakers' edited remarks follow.

Well, we will mention Bland Simpson quite a lot tonight, and not just because he has had a better year than Ol' Roy. Bland has had many good years with words written, spoken, sung, and played, but no year better than the one when he had the great good fortune to win the hand and the heart of Ann. Those of you who know Ann already know her excellent work as a photographer, editor, environmental advocate, explorer, mother, spouse, and fulfiller of a host of duties at the School of Government as associate dean and helpmate at concerts and performances and gatherings of ramblers and cohorts and such. A great many folk love the work of Bland Simpson; I expect at least as many secretly carry a torch for Ann Cary Simpson.

Now, H. G. Jones reminded me recently not to be too complimentary of Bland tonight because after all we, and especially Ann, must somehow live with him after this evening is over. But I do not think a swollen ego is likely to be the result. I know of no one more grounded in the world about him and at peace with the life he lives than Bland. So when we go overboard tonight, we go willingly and happily.

My admiration for the work of Bland Simpson goes back some thirty-four years to the days when I was Washington Correspondent for a group of Southern newspapers—Norfolk, Greensboro, and Roanoke—and heard about an upcoming performance of an Off Broadway musical called “Diamond Studs” at Ford’s Theater in Washington. When it first appeared in New York in 1975, the *New York Times*’ critique contained this restrained comment: “Yes, Yes, A thousand times, Yes!”

We found out why the *Times* was so positive that night at Ford’s Theater. This work of genius combined, in the New York version, good writing and two notable bands, Bland’s Southern States Fidelity Choir and the Red Clay Ramblers, which Bland would join a decade later. It was our first look at the work of Bland Simpson and his collaborators, and I have been listening to his music and reading his prose ever since, and cannot imagine what North Carolina would be like without his signal contributions to understanding, appreciating, and celebrating our history, our cuisine, our culture, our geology and environment. We would be much the poorer.

I have spent some time looking up all the things that Bland Simpson has been good at. In fact, it took so much time simply to print out his curriculum vitae that my printer ran out of ink and paper before the job was done. But you simply cannot measure the breadth and depth and girth of the work that Bland has done without going back nearly forty years when he launched his careers—including, I note, his early work as a journalist when he won a prize in the North Carolina Press Association’s annual Editorial Contest for a three-part investigative series in the *Carolina Financial Times* on the challenges facing North Carolina’s Outer Banks. He continues to draw

attention to the perils that might befall our coastline in his performances, his writings, and his work as a member of the board of the North Carolina Coastal Federation, which he and his musical colleagues generously support with their benefit performances each year.

The astonishing list of Bland's accomplishments as an author, songwriter, playwright, performer, pianist, singer, teacher, creative writing program head, acting academic department head, television host, speaker—even Halloween Day guide to Who's Who in the old Chapel Hill Cemetery on the corner of this campus—made me realize that it might be far easier to list the things that Bland has not done or cannot do than to talk about the things he has done. (I am tempted to add jury-tampering to the list, but that's an innocent boyhood story when it was his job to pull names out of the sheriff's hat when empaneling a Pasquotank County jury. That, and other confessions, are in *Into the Sound Country* for those who wish to know how it was done.)

The list of things Bland has not done is apparently short. For all his musical talent, no one has ever seen him don a pink tutu and dance Swan Lake, though perhaps he has done it in his trademark vest, button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up and his L.L. Bean gumshoe boots. And no one, as far as I can ascertain, has heard him sing a Wagnerian opera in the original German, though I have no doubt that if you hum a few bars in Italian he could pick it up. I know this because the Ramblers have entertained audiences everywhere with Spike Jones' hilarious sendup of the nineteenth century opera Pagliacci.

I have discovered a few personal failings that honesty compels me to note. He is not, says Jack Herrick, "a very good golfer, though he loves the game." And I am told that Bland's abilities as a fixit man at home extend only so far as the nearest claw hammer.

On the other hand, he is described by the same reliable source as a wonderful father to Hunter and Susannah and Cary, a good cook who has graduated with honors from his "camp cook" days, and a world class listener and noticer who has an uncanny memory for all that he hears and reads and observes: "He always has a story," Ann says—"stories," she notes, that always have a way of connecting people to things or places or ideas.

His bandmate and longtime writing partner Jack Herrick marvels at Bland's "statewide footprint" and his contributions to the state's richly deserved "degree of funkiness." Speaking of funkiness, there's also the story of Bland's nickname. If I understand it correctly, there was a time when the band was practicing a song called Buttercup Boogie and someone decided everyone needed a nickname—and Buttercup would be Bland's. Well, no it won't, said Bland, but it could be Kingfish—the name his closest friends often call him to this day, or sometimes just "K.F."

Bland went off to New York after college days to make his way in

the world of letters, and thanks to a bumpy early experience and some wise counsel he was back home within a few years, writing and performing from a Chapel Hill base and taking his work regularly to New York, and then to audiences up and down the Eastern Seaboard and across the country and to the Continent and the Middle East and North Africa to show off the delightful work of the Ramblers, one of the most engaging collections of talent and charm and toe-tappin', finger poppin' music to be found anywhere. And soon came a steady flow of books about North Carolina people, places, and things.

Now, if you have not spent an evening with "King Mackerel and the Blues Are Running" on the stereo and a copy of the Simpsons' *Into the Sound Country* in your hands, you have missed an audible and literary treat. What you realize very quickly is that Bland writes with his ear. As a lyricist and a musician, he is mindful of how words sound to the listener as well as to the reader, as his editor at UNC Press, David Perry, has noted. He thinks about how his words sound and how they hit.

That's part of the key to Bland's remarkable works. But behind every note, every bar, every verse, every phrase, every sentence, every paragraph, lies his careful research and broad readings into our history, our topography, our geography, our sense of place as a people. The noted historian Jack Temple Kirby thought about this and wrote, "Simpson has read his anthropology, geology, zoology, and botany well, and cleverly concealed it."

I asked Jack Herrick if he could think of anyone else who has given us so many ways to hear about and read about and think about North Carolina—plays, songs, musical performances, books, lectures, television programs—and Herrick could not. "I don't know anyone who has his fingers in so many pies, and his passionate love for North Carolina fuels that. His radar is wide open for all things North Carolina."

He writes with grace and wit and respect for the often colorful, sometimes oddball characters he runs across in the course of his works. He has written that he came to realize that there is "an implied conversation between author and reader." They are a hallmark of his books. His portrait of Reggie Gregory, ranger for the Dismal Swamp State Park, is a model of the form. Bland wrote, "He was made head to toe of peat and juniper and swampwater, and he had an ingrained contempt for those in power who assessed his home grounds from afar or who came in sporadically and at best gave the territory a few minutes of cursory windshield appraisal." I wish I could write like that. A sentence like that can sound easy to those who do not make their living putting together words. They come from a remarkable volume called *The Great Dismal*, first published in 1990 and reissued in 1998 with a new epilogue by the author. It is the key to understanding what Bland

Simpson has been about. For that book set Bland off on an odyssey—with a john boat strapped atop his station wagon—of North Carolina's forgotten or not ever discovered places, at least to folks who live way upland, of river towns and backwaters and little cafes set alongside the great rivers of Eastern North Carolina, its sounds and its barrier islands. So many North Carolinians leave the Piedmont plateau in their hurry to get to Wrightsville or Atlantic Beach or Nags Head and regard the broad flat plain they cross for three or four hours as a great emptiness. Bland Simpson has brought that region to life for us and made us aware of the vitality of its people, the marvels of its landscape, and the fascinating stories of the places connecting North Carolina's past with its present, writing our history as he goes along.

In the epilogue to *The Great Dismal*, Bland wrote, "I had no idea then how much deeper it would lead me into the Carolina coastal plain, no idea that I hadn't really finished anything but had in fact only begun an exploration, a wandering, a walkabout, a ramble that will last me the rest of my days; or perhaps I had merely acknowledged one that had begun, as the book does with the turtles sunning on the Charles Creek logs in Elizabeth City, with my messing about in skiffs with my father on the Pasquotank River."

Years later he wrote about crossing the Alligator River on a cold January night. Now, I'm an old sailor, and so his words about that evening struck a chord with me when he wrote: "Let the pilgrims who pass over the bridge regard the great river and the boats that float it, the scows, schooners, sloops, cruiser and skiffs, and let them know too of the ghost-boats that sleep beneath it, and let them each to each raise a glass to the wind that blows and the ship that goes, and the lass that loves a sailor."

We cannot do justice to Bland's writings, his music, his theatrical works, the versatility of his pieces, or even begin to enumerate all the notables with whom he has performed—whether symphony, ballet, silver screen, on Broadway and off, honky-tonk café to tobacco warehouse to Kennedy Center—in the short time we have had together tonight. But I can tell you that when I jack up the gain on his tribute to the Neuse River on the album "Yonder," when I reread his sleuthwork in digging out what might have happened to the *Ghost Ship of Diamond Shoals*, when I go back and see through his words what he saw in the gloaming that night over southern Albemarle Sound, I am struck by the simple fact that in our friend Bland Simpson we have among us that rarest of Carolina's priceless gems, a man of many poetic parts, but at the heart of it all, a master teacher—at home in Chapel Hill.



Riding the Banks with Bland

Lucinda H. MacKethan

I am grateful for many reasons to have been invited to add a small share to the tributes offered to Bland on this occasion, but the bonus I didn't really expect when I accepted my charge was the opportunity I have had to go back to my own childhood memories of the part of North Carolina that Bland and Ann have so exquisitely captured for us in word, song, and image. I was a child of bluegrass Kentucky whose parents had been exiled by the Depression to the land-locked, rubber-ridden tire-town of Akron, Ohio. Yes, it's true—by accident of birth I could be called a Yankee, born in that state that Walker Percy so loved to make fun of, yet do remember what Lee Smith says—just because a litter of kittens might happen to be born in an oven, you still couldn't call them biscuits. My parents, as genteel southern children, both were lucky to spend summers with their respective families at the old sea island resorts of Georgia, where they developed a lifelong



hankering for the sound of surf, the warm touch of the sun, and the hot blanket of the sand.

So in spite of lack of money and long distance, they carried on their families' tradition for their progeny, making up a caravan, with two or three other families, that each summer journeyed down the new Pennsylvania turnpike, turned southeast to cross Virginia, in order finally to arrive at a row of undistinguished cinderblock cabins called The Ocean View Cottages, in Kill Devil Hills, which became the NC's outer banks first township in 1953, the year probably of my first visit. It was here that I learned how to swim when my dad threw me into those rough, thrilling, ice-cold ocean waves, spoiling me for any other kind of water; here I learned how to beg nickels from elegant guests at the Old Carolinian Hotel, and here I learned to recognize, forever after, that incomparable feeling, the one Bland Simpson so often invokes—that feeling of the heart lifting when you ride the bridge from Manteo across Roanoke Sound to Nags Head or from Cape Carteret across Bogue Sound to Emerald Isle; you know that feeling, the one that hits you when the car leaves the mainland, and you absorb, even though you can't yet see or hear it, the ocean's blue, roaring presence.

No wonder that I ended up a permanent resident of North Carolina, married to a man who would rather go fishing for blues and drum than do almost anything else on earth. One day when John and I were out on Ocracoke, staying at our second home, the Pony Island Hotel, we somehow got our hands on a cassette tape of "King Mackerel and the Blues Are Running," and to our children's dismay, listened to it, and sang with it, all the way back to Raleigh. And that's how Bland Simpson, then and now, keeps taking us back to the Banks.

Bland has written that "From my early years living in Pasquotank County, on a blackwater river in a town at most twelve feet above the sea, from as early as anything I can recall, I have heard and known and loved this word *sound*." He is speaking of course, of those waterbodies that are fed by North Carolina's rivers before those rivers "feed the sea" as he says—those Sounds whose native names are poems: Currituck and Croatan, Back Sound and Bogue, the wide Pamlico and the narrow Shallotte, those waters that so beautifully separate barrier island from mainland and prepare the tired traveler gently and gradually for the transition from city smog to coastal clarity.

Yet Bland is a man whose life and work embody that other meaning of the word "sound" as well. And so it is that not only through listening to Bland singing his tunes in *King Mackerel* but also through reading his books on Sound Country, I knew the sound of his voice a good while before we ever met. This meant that when we did meet it was like coming upon an old friend, no introduction needed. Bland's storytelling voice springs out of his

writing as well as his songs—you hear his words on the page more than you read them, and for all of us Bankers—by which I mean Outer and Inner Bankers, not the Wall Street variety—hearing Bland Simpson's voice is a way to get to the heart's home, our own inimitable lost colony.

No one here this evening really needs to be told of all the achievements that make the award we celebrate with Bland tonight so appropriate. Louis Rubin has pinpointed the nature of his remarkable career when he writes that “Bland Simpson is the *grandmaster* of the life and lore of Eastern North Carolina in print and music.” Since that about sums it up, I decided that in the time I have been allotted, I will do what English teachers do best, or at least most often—I will try my hand at a psychoanalysis of the motivations behind imagery and motifs, the rhymes and reasons of “the Bland Simpson Ouevre.” Like any good Freudian, I decided to start as far back in Bland’s childhood as I could go, which led me of course to Pasquotank County, and the river of the same name that runs its course a half-mile from his first longterm boyhood home. And there I found, in that long finger-shaped county’s geographical history, the information that is all we need to explain what makes Bland Simpson tick. The mystery is solved just by knowing how “Pasquotank”—as both river and county—got its name: It comes from the Algoquian Indian word *pasketanki*, which means “where the current of the stream divides or forks.”

As I see it, what Bland does is what the Pasquotank does: In his songs and plays, in his personality, in his life interests—or obsessions, we might call them, in his histories and mysteries, the current always divides, presenting us with a double stream, or a doubling of sources and sensations, what he himself has called a “cross-pollination.” The content of his productions, in all their diversity, is still all of a piece, since the varieties of inspiration and forms of expression overlap and braid together like a strong rope. But in his works there is always also a kind of *double-note* harmony, or an opposition, or point-counterpoint of different strains going and coming. Let me give you some examples:

Take the Red Clay Ramblers, for instance: Bland’s association with this group goes way back, beyond his formal admission to its ranks in the 1980s, so that he inherited its first impetus as a string-band that had its musical roots way over on the other side of the state, the Mt. Airy side. But the Red Clay Rambler sound has forked in many other directions too, letting all kinds of strange streams fill in—from pure old-time tin pan alley, to the haunting blues of the piedmont-bred Carolina Ramblers, to the raucous drinking buddy songs of boatmen and fishermen down east.

Consider too, how Bland, his cohorts, and their lyrics are just as much at home with ballet companies as with cloggers, playing in concert halls, or

wineries, in grocery stores or university auditoriums. Consider how with one hand Bland helped to invent a genre for piano, guitar, banjo, and sometimes sax known as “Musician’s Theatre” (also called a “whatzit band”) while with the other hand he re-invented a lost literary genre that goes all the way back to John Lawson and William Byrd, Sidney Lanier, and Longfellow—“Swamp Lit” we call it, with Bland’s work joining the pantheon of poems and travelogues and treatises that have given the swaggiest swamp of them all, the Great Dismal, its enduring status as one of the great American nature myths.

Consider how you have seen Bland dressed in dapper professor garb, strolling across campus in Chapel Hill, or wearing suit, tie, and silk vest in a concert hall, but you’re just as likely to turn on the TV and catch him in a rerun of one of his PBS specials, pole-boating in kakhis and a baseball cap, gliding by snakes and tree frogs and fending off mosquitoes.

Consider, as well, that Bland can write a non-fiction memoir just as easily as he can write a novel, and then just say to hell with both genres and produce something even better—a non-fiction novel, *The Mystery of the Beautiful Nell Cropsey*, and then a work of fictionalized non-fiction, *Ghost Ship of Diamond Shoals: The Mystery of the Carroll A. Deering*. And he can make musical history out of characters as different as Jesse James in *Diamond Studs* and the Rev. Will B. Dunn in *Kudzu*. He can keep company with the likes of us, sitting at a white linen covered table and speaking the King’s English, or he can hang out with an old salt by the name of Jake Mills in a Boston Whaler, sipping a little something on the edge of the marsh grass, passing the time with herons, crows, and buzzards.

And think about the divided range of folks he has made into heroes: doomed Jim Wilcox, who may or may not have murdered Beautiful Nell; victorious Moses Grandy, the North Carolina slave who bought his freedom, finally, by working on canal boats in Camden County, and made it North at last to write his story; or tragic Neva Gaskill Spencer, the postmistress at Lupton out on the Hog Islands, accused of having her hand in the till, with disastrous consequences for all; or Corporal Seth Perry, from Okisco, NC, but also of the 119th Infantry, Company K, who during the Great War fell while “crossing a field of fire in Bellecourt, France, trying to warn an American Company of a surprise attack,” and whose remains were finally sent back to his family in Elizabeth City, where thousands came to see him buried at home, where he belonged.

And finally, consider, as Exhibit A, Bland’s choice of a life companion—a Sea Level Girl from down east, an environmentalist and photographer who gives him the great gift of a second pair of eyes in Sound Country, as he does her; geographically, the merger of Ann and Bland brings together two other divided streams, uniting the Core Sound below the great

Pamlico with the Albemarle above it; artistically, the merger of these Bankers combines a master wordsmith and a visionary photographer who together capture in language and image the breadth, the depth, the imagery, the past and present—the whole, full spirit of their “given place.”

Someone once asked Bland if, after his five books tracking every form of wild, wood, and human life from Knott’s Island in the North to Bald Head in the South, from the Labrador Current in the northern Albemarle to the subtropic current that flows past Bird Island in the South if he wasn’t just about out of territory to tap. But we know he’s hardly gotten going. Think of his range, as he himself has defined it: his territory runs “from classroom to concert hall and then out into the field, the swamps, or out on the big open water, and then back again.” It is, indeed, to quote him, “a pretty happy mix.” And while all his haunts might seem to be divided streams, to sort one out from all the others would be, as he says, “Impossible, like dividing up air in a jug.” So Papa Bland, tonight we try to give back to you, in small measure, “your sand mountain song,” and we’ll be along in a while, trying to follow you in style, and so very grateful for the ride.



Another Precinct Heard From . . .

Frank G. Queen

I remember distinctly when I met Bland Simpson, now thirty-six years ago. It was at the Danziger's Ranch House, out on Airport Road. As I was shaking his hand, I clearly remember thinking: "This guy sure is wearing a lot of makeup."

Turns out he was appearing a few minutes later in the opening of a musical play he had written, "Diamond Studs." He played a couple of roles, one the governor of Missouri. It was quite entertaining, what with the dance-hall girls.

A couple of years later, I was working in Washington and got a call to go over to the Kennedy Center, where Bland was putting on a show called "Hot Grog." It was about pirates. Bland had a character in it, the governor of North Carolina, who offered a pardon to the pirates. It was also quite entertaining, what with the pirate girls.



This, then, was a minor thematic element in Bland's early work: governors. He always seemed to have one in the plays. It was because of Bland's upbringing, which was what brought us to be friends: we both had politics served every night at the supper table. I was brought up to be, at least, the congressman from the 11th district of North Carolina. Bland was raised to be the governor of North Carolina. Boys State of course, Senate page in Raleigh, then the Congressional Page School in Washington for a semester. All he had to do was go to his state's university, then law school—it was all mapped out for him. Everything was going well, until that dinner table conversation where he allowed that he didn't think he was going to go to law school, after all.

The plans of parents are sometimes frustrated, but they always manifest. Bland wrote governors into his plays, often as rather cartoonish characters (in contrast to the actual occupants of that office). It was long after his father died when Bland wrote a love song to him, called "Sand Mountain Song," the chorus of which was just quoted by professor McKethan. You cannot hear it and fail to weep for the father you had or the father you had not.

.....

A second theme of Bland's work, more enduring, is his preoccupation with running water. Bland has written an entire book about what he calls the inner islands of the Albemarle Sound. Most of these islands are so small they barely have names. From this mountaineer's perspective, they aren't even islands at all—just places of persistent shallow water.

Bland has written four or five songs about specific rivers. In North Carolina: the Neuse, the Cape Fear, probably the Pasquotank, I'm not sure about the French Broad. He once wrote a love song—to his wife, Ann, of all people—and managed to work in both Boundary Bay and the Columbia River, up in Washington State. He has recorded a song entitled "Good Gal Gravyboat."

Bland wrote a non-fiction novel about a murder where the body floats up in the Pasquotank River of his native Elizabeth City. He has written a ghost-ship book. And I know for a fact that he has in a drawer a half-finished folk opera about the damming up of a river, the Santee, down in South Carolina. One of its tunes is called "Don't Come Around Looking for Ol' Man River."

As they might say up in the mountains: "Bland's queer for water."

.....

At the same time, Bland is the sort of fellow your mother loves right away. I have often thought my own mother liked Bland more than she did

me. One time he came through Waynesville and he didn't even stop at my house in town—he went straight to see my mother out at the farm. Couple of times a year, Mother could be counted on to call me: "Frank, turn on the public TV! Bland's on Bill Friday's show!"

"Mother," I said, "who isn't on Bill Friday's show? Before he quits, Bill Friday will have interviewed every single person in the state. That's why they call it 'North Carolina People.' He's using the alphabet—when he gets to the Waynesville Qs, then it's you and me, Mom."

Several years ago, around Christmas, Bland was on public TV telling a sweet little story about a kayaker who lost his boat at Christmas, down on the Sound. Bland walks along the shore, wearing this vest that he has on all the time, telling this story. Takes ten minutes to tell it. Like I say, it was sweet—the first couple of times it was on. Then North Carolina Public TV started to run it every Christmas, like a Charlie Brown special. Finally, even my mom was a little jaded. The last time, she left this message on my answering machine: "Frank, Bland's on TV again, if you care. He's telling the shaggy dog story about the kayaker again. Still got on that vest."

This award ceremony seems an odd proceeding. If you are a churchgoer, you know that you cannot sing the hymn "In the Garden" without a corpse nearby. To me it seems powerfully strange for us to speak like this about Bland, when, in a minute, he will get up on his hind legs and talk back. But this evening, and Bland's life so far, has demonstrated at least two things: One, that Bland loves—passionately loves—North Carolina and her places and her people, and two, he will endeavor about anything that holds even the slightest hope of royalties. He is a worthy recipient of the award.

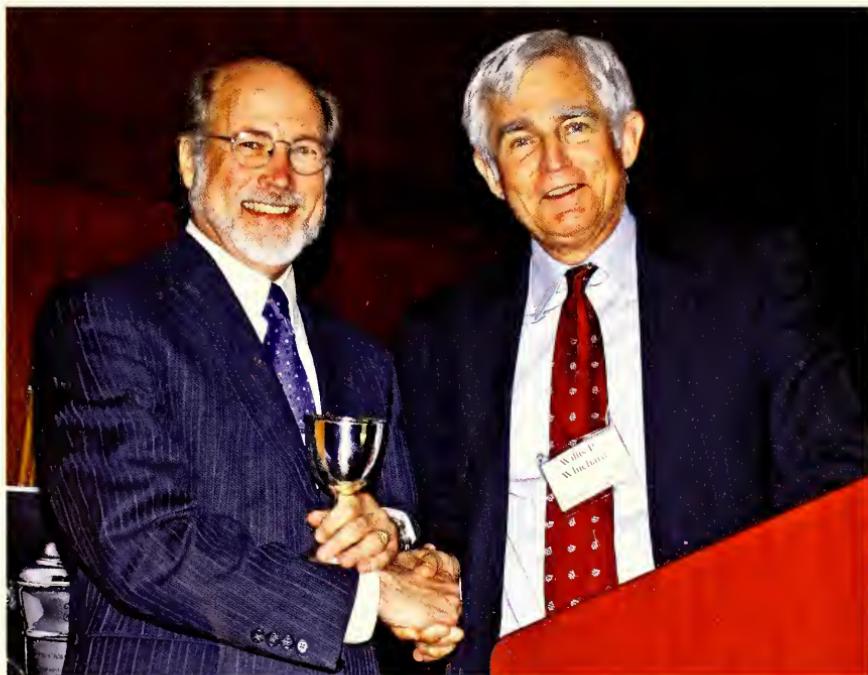


Presentation of the Award

Willis P. Whichard, President

Some years ago John and Ann Sanders purchased the trophy that symbolizes the North Caroliniana Society Award. It resides in the North Carolina Collection at Wilson Library on the UNC Campus, and you are encouraged to stop by to see it when you are in that area. An enlarged photograph of the trophy is displayed here on the stage.

The recipient of the award each year receives a small sterling silver cup. It is now my privilege to present this year's award, a cup inscribed with his name, to Bland Simpson. Bland, if you will please come forward to receive the cup and to respond for this fine audience of your family, friends, and admirers.



Acceptance of the Award

Bland Simpson

Thank you, President Whichard. Thank you, folks.

I have a couple of songs for you, but first, I will say: I grew up wanting to be a lawyer, like Frank. And then I decided I wanted to be a journalist, like Jack. And then I did quite a range of other things for a while and by the grace of God and the late Max Steele, I got a chance to be a professor, although it will take me quite a while to get the skills of Lucinda MacKethan. The poet Jim Seay, longtime friend and colleague, wrote an epic poem many years ago called "Said There Was Somebody Talking to Him Through His Air Conditioner." And deep within that poem is this wonderful couplet that I took immediately to heart and have tried to live by. Very simple:

*You've got to live in your own time
And be with the best people you can find.*

Well, best people, I have found you. And it's been my great good fortune to have been finding you all my life. And the last third of my life or so, particularly, has been just amazing, kind of an amazing whirlwind, and all kinds of good fortune has befallen me. I have my *alma mater*, my soul mother, the University, to thank for very much of that. My greatest inspiration and the greatest of many wonderful collaborators, is my wife, the former Ann Cary Kindell of Sea Level, North Carolina, who for twenty-two years has been Ann Cary Simpson. If you'd join me—this award is shared by her.

[*Bland Simpson then went to the piano and sang of his two homes, Chapel Hill and Elizabeth City, in "New Hope Chapel on the Hill" and "Home on the River." He was then joined on stage by his former student Joseph Terrell of High Point, and the two led the assembled in the State Toast and "The Old North State."*] 



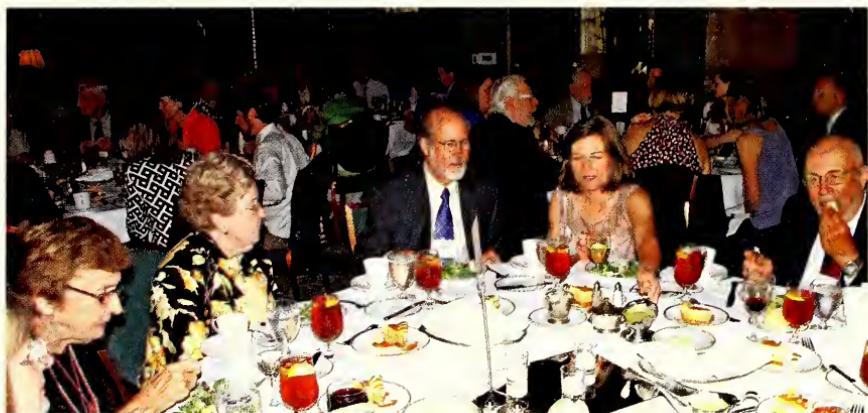
Following his formal acceptance remarks, Bland Simpson closed the evening by playing and singing; then, for the finale, he introduced one of his students, Joseph Terrell, and together they led the audience in singing "The Old North State."

Family
and
Friends

Random Snapshots

THE GRANDFATHERS

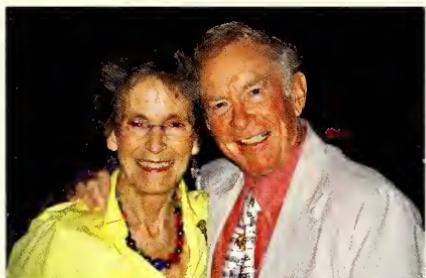
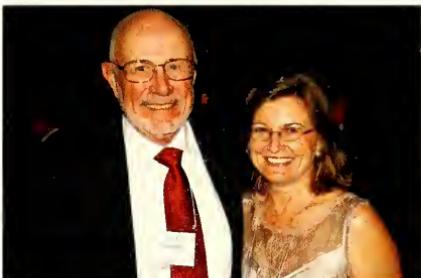
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THE GRANDEAVERS

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THE GRANDFATHERS

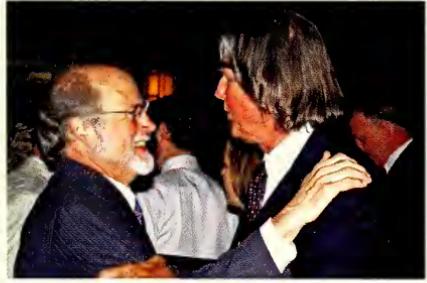
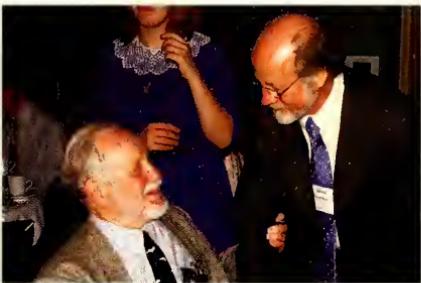
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THE GRANDFATHERS

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THE GRANDFATHERS

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NORTH CAROLINIANA SOCIETY IMPRINTS
H. G. Jones, General Editor, Numbers 1-49

- No. 1. *An Evening at Monticello: An Essay in Reflection* (1978)
 by Edwin M. Gill
- No. 2. *The Paul Green I Know* (1978)
 by Elizabeth Lay Green
- No. 3. *The Albert Coates I Know* (1979)
 by Gladys Hall Coates
- No. 4. *The Sam Ervin I Know* (1980)
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- No. 23. *Growing Up in North Carolina*, by Charles Kuralt, and
 The Uncommon Laureate, by Wallace H. Kuralt (1993)
- No. 24. *Chancellors Extraordinary: J. Carlyle Sitterson and LeRoy T. Walker* (1995)
 by William C. Friday and Willis P. Whichard

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by Frank Borden Hanes, Sr.
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by Shirley Taylor Frye and Henry E. Frye
- No. 47. *Surprise of the Century* (2009)
by James E. Holshouser, Jr.
- No. 48. *The Colonial Records of North Carolina* (2010)
edited by William S. Price Jr.
- No. 49. *The Grandfathers* (2010)
by Bland Simpson

The North Caroliniana Society

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Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514-8890

Telephone (919) 962-1172; Fax (919) 962-4452; hgjones@email.unc.edu; www.ncsociety.org

Chartered on 11 September 1975 as a private nonprofit corporation under provisions of Chapter 55A of the *General Statutes of North Carolina*, the North Caroliniana Society is dedicated to the promotion of increased knowledge and appreciation of North Carolina's heritage through the encouragement of scholarly research and writing in and teaching of state and local history, literature, and culture; publication of documentary materials, including the numbered, limited-edition *North Caroliniana Society Imprints* and *North Caroliniana Society Keepsakes*; sponsorship of professional and lay conferences, seminars, lectures, and exhibitions; commemoration of historic events, including sponsorship of markers and plaques; and through assistance to the North Carolina Collection of UNC-Chapel Hill and other cultural organizations with kindred objectives. The Society is administered by an entirely volunteer staff and a motto of "Substance, not Show."

Founded by H. G. Jones and incorporated by Jones, William S. Powell, and Louis M. Connor, Jr., who soon were joined by a distinguished group of North Carolinians, the Society was limited to a hundred members for the first decade. It elects from time to time additional individuals meeting its strict criterion of "adjudged performance" in service to their state's culture—i.e., those who have demonstrated a continuing interest in and support of the historical, literary, and cultural heritage of North Carolina. The Society, a tax-exempt organization under provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, expects continued service from its members, and for its programs it depends upon the contributions, bequests, and devises of its members and friends. Its IRS number is 56-1119848. The Society administers a fund, given in 1987 by the Research Triangle Foundation in honor of its retiring board chairman and the Society's longtime president, from which more than 300 Archie K. Davis Fellowships have been awarded for research in North Carolina's historical and cultural resources. The Society also sponsors the North Caroliniana Book Award, recognizing a book that best captures the essence of North Carolina; the William Stevens Powell Award to a senior student who has contributed most to an understanding of the history and traditions of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; and the H. G. Jones North Carolina History Prizes for winners in the National History Day competition.

A highlight of the Society's year is the presentation of the North Caroliniana Society Award to an individual or organization for long and distinguished service in the encouragement, production, enhancement, promotion, and preservation of North Caroliniana. Starting with Paul Green, the Society has recognized Albert Coates, Sam J. Ervin Jr., Sam Ragan, Gertrude S. Caraway, John Fries Blair, William and Ida Friday, William S. Powell, Mary and James Semans, David Stick, William M. Cochrane, Emma Neal Morrison, Burke Davis, Lawrence F. London, Frank H. Kenan, Charles Kuralt, Archie K. Davis, H. G. Jones, J. Carlyle Sitterson, Leroy T. Walker, Hugh M. Morton, John L. Sanders, Doris Betts, Reynolds Price, Richard H. Jenrette, Wilma Dykeman, Frank Borden Hanes Sr., Maxine Swalin, Elizabeth Vann Moore, W. Trent Ragland Jr., W. Dallas Herring, John Hope Franklin, Betty Ray McCain, Joseph F. Steelman, William B. Aycock, Fred Chappell, Henry E. and Shirley T. Frye, Robert W. and Jessie Rae Scott, James E. Holshouser Jr., Bland Simpson, and, on its sesquicentennial, the North Carolina Collection.

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1984	<i>William C. & Ida H. Friday</i>	2001	<i>Wilma Dykeman</i>
1985	<i>William S. Powell</i>	2002	<i>Frank Borden Hanes Sr.</i>
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1987	<i>David Stick</i>	2004	<i>Elizabeth Vann Moore</i>
1988	<i>William McWhorter Cochrane</i>	2004	<i>W. Trent Ragland Jr.</i>
1989	<i>Emma Neal Morrison</i>	2005	<i>W. Dallas Herring</i>
1990	<i>Burke Davis</i>	2005	<i>John Hope Franklin</i>
1991	<i>Lawrence F. London</i>	2006	<i>Betty Ray McCain</i>
1992	<i>Frank Hawkins Kenan</i>	2006	<i>Joseph F. Steelman</i>
1993	<i>Charles Kuralt</i>	2007	<i>William B. Aycock</i>
1994	<i>H. G. Jones</i>	2007	<i>Fred Chappell</i>
1994	<i>Archie K. Davis</i>	2008	<i>Henry E. & Shirley Frye</i>
1994	<i>North Carolina Collection</i>	2008	<i>Robert & Jessie Rae Scott</i>
1995	<i>J. Carlyle Sitterson</i>	2009	<i>James E. Holshouser Jr.</i>

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